

Passion for care drives jurist's zeal for adoption

By Brett McLaughlin

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DETROIT — The state's number one jurist will admit that the threat of lost funding ignited her interest in the adoption process, but it is her passion for quality family life that is fanning the flames.

And, by the end of November, Maura Corrigan, chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, hopes that an inferno of adoption interest is raging across the state.

November 25 — two days before Thanksgiving — has been deemed "Michigan Adoption Day 2003," has been themed "Giving thanks for families" and will be a day that Corrigan hopes will focus the attention of caring people on adoption-eligible children in the state.

"The crashing of the institution of marriage has created a huge epidemic of child support," Corrigan said, pointing to 800,000 open support cases in the state, half of which are paternity cases.

"We used to have a culture of marriage. Then we had a culture of divorce," she continued. "Now, we have a culture of no relationship at all. We have the culture of the one-night stand."

A painfully real result of that change has been the accumulation of a \$7 billion child support arrearage, a number so huge it attracted the attention of the federal government and a threatened loss of \$200 million in federal funds.

Prompted by the federal review, Corrigan teamed with the state's Family Independence Agency to form an adoption panel to review and recommend changes in the adoption process. A final report was issued in September, substantive changes continue to be implemented and Corrigan has become a passionate crusader for children.

An offspring of Irish-Americans, Corrigan was raised Catholic, graduated from Marygrove College and remembers well the saying "safe home" used whenever someone was leaving the house.

"That was my prayer after 9-11, for all the abandoned who were still alive," Corrigan said, "safe home."

"We need, so much, for children to have permanent relationships," she continued. "How do we create relationships that last?"

Answering that question has become a mission for Corrigan who, despite being the mother of two grown children, has toyed with the idea of adopting a child herself.

"My staff has convinced me I would be better off being a foster grandparent," the former Boysville director quipped.

The state's own push to address nearly 20,000 total children in foster care (as of July 31), has been further driven by the chief justice's own desire to answer the question "why can't we do better?"

Changes she has ordered or initiated have had some impact. The average wait time for a dependency appeal has been reduced from 325 days to 274. Stiffer deadlines for appointing counsel, ordering transcripts and filing appeals have been instituted. Lawyers who have been appointed to represent children but have refused to meet with them are now being threatened with fines.

"These changes are not very popular with many of the people who practice before the appellate courts," Corrigan said. "But these dependency cases are very much like cases on death row, which is why the chief judge and I are personally monitoring the status of these cases. Life or death is really at stake here — maybe not death, but a ruined life."

Last year, there were over 2,800 adoptions in Michigan. While Corrigan applauds those families, her desire to unite more children and adults has given rise to Michigan's participation in National Adoption Day.

"We have 4,600 children ready to be adopted," she said. "I want to move that number to zero. That way, everyone would have a safe home."

"That's how we are going to measure success."